A VINTAGE SHORT ORIGINAL

ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH

At the Reunion Buffet

An Isabel Dalhousie Story

Alexander McCall Smith

Alexander McCall Smith is the author of the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series, the Isabel Dalhousie series, the Portuguese Irregular Verbs series, the 44 Scotland Street series, and the Corduroy Mansions series. He is professor emeritus of medical law at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and has served with many national and international organizations concerned with bioethics. He was born in what is now known as Zimbabwe and was a law professor at the University of Botswana.

www.alexandermccallsmith.com

ALSO BY ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH

In the No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency Series

The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency
Tears of the Giraffe
Morality for Beautiful Girls
The Kalahari Typing School for Men
The Full Cupboard of Life
In the Company of Cheerful Ladies
Blue Shoes and Happiness
The Good Husband of Zebra Drive
The Miracle at Speedy Motors
Tea Time for the Traditionally Built
The Double Comfort Safari Club
The Saturday Big Tent Wedding Party
The Limpopo Academy of Private Detection
The Minor Adjustment Beauty Salon
The Handsome Man's De Luxe Café

For Young Readers

The Great Cake Mystery
The Mystery of Meerkat Hill
The Mystery of the Missing Lion

In the Isabel Dalhousie Series

The Sunday Philosophy Club
Friends, Lovers, Chocolate
The Right Attitude to Rain
The Careful Use of Compliments
The Comforts of a Muddy Saturday
The Lost Art of Gratitude
The Charming Quirks of Others

The Forgotten Affairs of Youth
[*The Perils of Morning Coffee*—eBook only]
The Uncommon Appeal of Clouds

In the 44 Scotland Street Series

44 Scotland Street
Espresso Tales
Love Over Scotland
The World According to Bertie
The Unbearable Lightness of Scones
The Importance of Being Seven
Bertie Plays the Blues
Sunshine on Scotland Street
Bertie's Guide to Life and Mothers

In the Corduroy Mansions Series

Corduroy Mansions
The Dog Who Came in from the Cold
A Conspiracy of Friends

In the Portuguese Irregular Verbs Series

Portuguese Irregular Verbs
The Finer Points of Sausage Dogs
At the Villa of Reduced Circumstances
Unusual Uses for Olive Oil

Other Works

La's Orchestra Saves the World
The Girl Who Married a Lion and Other Tales from Africa
Trains and Lovers
The Forever Girl
Emma

At the Reunion Buffet

Alexander McCall Smith

A Vintage Short

Vintage Books
A Division of Penguin Random House LLC
New York

Copyright © 2015 by Alexander McCall Smith

All rights reserved. Published in the United States by Vintage Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York, and in Canada by Random House of Canada, a division of Penguin Random House of Canada Ltd., Toronto.

Vintage and colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

The Cataloging-in-Publication Data for "At the Reunion Buffet" is available from the Library of Congress.

Vintage eShort ISBN: 9781101970461

www.vintagebooks.com

v4.1

ep

Contents

Cover
Alexander McCall Smith
Also by Alexander McCall Smith
Title Page
Copyright

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five

Chapter One

"I never went to my class reunion," said Jamie. "I thought about it—quite hard, actually, but at the end of the day decided no, I wouldn't."

"Wouldn't, or couldn't?" asked Isabel Dalhousie, his wife, his lover, his friend, and, in addition to all that, editor of the *Review of Applied Ethics*. "There's a difference, you know."

"I could have gone, I suppose, but somehow I couldn't face it. Class reunions, well…" He shrugged.

She allowed her gaze to dwell on him, making it possible for a rush of love to overwhelm her, as it often did when she was with him, unexpectedly for the most part, at odd moments—on awakening and seeing that he was still there; while walking in the Pentland Hills with the light behind him and the wind in his hair; in the kitchen, when he was cooking, and might turn to her, holding out a spoon, and say: *Do you like this?* She had always understood that love could have an intense physical effect; could fill a space somewhere in the chest, could turn knees weak, could raise the pulse; could intoxicate, just as could a strong martini or a glass of champagne. *Could*, she thought, and would…but only if you allowed it, only if you opened whatever portals of the heart needed to be opened. And some people, of course, found it difficult to do that.

She loved Jamie with an intensity that had not diminished in any way since they had stood side by side in Canongate Kirk those few short years ago and exchanged their vows; if anything, she loved him even more now than she had loved him then. People said that marriage could change everything, could dull whatever initial excitement there had been, but that had not been her experience—not at all. And yet, even as one loved somebody more and more, did one necessarily begin to know the other any better? She had heard of people who were married for forty years or more—in some cases for the best part of a lifetime—who then discovered that their spouses were not the people they had thought them to be; it was possible: some spouses kept secrets from one another, and perhaps never even revealed them—took them to the grave; and only then did the truth

emerge—of a passion concealed, perhaps; of an old lover who had never really gone away; of a past of vice, or greed, or foolishness—there was so much that could be hidden from others; so many ways for us to be other than what we wanted ourselves to be.

She realized that there were things about Jamie she did not know, and this conversation was straying into that difficult territory. Jamie never talked about his parents, which had struck her as odd. She had sensed, though, that it was something that he would not want her to probe. On one occasion she had said, almost jokingly, *You did have a mother, I assume,* and he had looked at her as if she were deliberately trying to wound him.

"Of course I had a mother."

She laughed nervously. "I was only joking. It's just that…"

"Just what?"

"Just that you never mention her. I know nothing about her. You never speak about her, do you?"

He had been silent for a while. Then he said, "It was a complicated relationship."

"It often is."

He inclined his head. "I wasn't very close to her latterly. I was when I was a little boy, but then…well, I suppose I wanted to be myself. Mothers can…" He searched for the word; any accusation against a mother, however justified, could seem so harsh. "Can suffocate their sons." He added quickly, "Not intentionally, of course."

She had nodded. The relationship of mothers and sons was very different from that of mothers and daughters; she knew that because her mother had been more ambitious for Isabel's brother than for Isabel herself. She had resented this apparent favoritism, because all of us want the complete approval of our parents and cannot bear the thought of any preference for a sibling. But that feeling had passed, and her mother's memory had become unassailable. *My sainted American mother* she was fond of saying; and why not? Why should we not have a private cult of our parents when cults of real saints—the sort who wrought miracles or led lives of privation on barren islands—have been taken away from us, made risible, reduced to being private weaknesses for the superstitious and the gullible.

She had barely talked to Jamie about his school days, and she wondered whether this was another area of experience that was for some reason out of bounds. Had he been happy? Who had his school friends been? She had no idea. There must be a reason why he had decided not to attend his ten-year class reunion; normally Jamie's instincts were social. If invited to a party, he went, and usually enjoyed himself; perhaps this did not apply to reunions.

This conversation took place in the morning room of their house in Edinburgh, a room that looked out over the lawn, the line of shrubs at its edge, and the high stone wall that prescribed the boundary of their garden. This was her private realm—the small scrap of land to which Isabel—and Jamie now—had title according to the law of Scotland; its owners, in as much as any of us can be said to own the ground we stand upon. *What we have, we all must lose*—that applied to everything, even that to which we thought we had the greatest right. We were tenants of this earth—nothing more.

He realized that she was waiting for an explanation. He gave one, although he seemed uncomfortable about it. “It’s just that we never choose the people we’re at school with, do we? We’re thrown together.”

He was right, she thought. Yet being thrown together was a universal, unavoidable fact of life. It started with birth, really, which was a form of being tossed into something we had not chosen. “But that’s what life is like, surely,” she ventured. “We don’t choose our neighbors. We don’t pick the people we work with. We take what we’re given.”

“Exactly,” he said. “But we can choose whether we want to socialize with the people we come into contact with. They don’t have to be our intimate friends. We don’t have to *like* them, do we?”

No, she thought, we don’t. She herself tried to like people—and generally succeeded—but Jamie was choosier when it came to his friends, and as a result had fewer than she did. She had noticed that, because she had seen how keen people were to become close to him; they seemed drawn to him, even those who met him casually; and she had seen, too, how reserved he could be when he became aware of their interest. It was something to do with his appearance, she imagined: the beautiful were never short of people eager to befriend them.

“But even if one isn’t going to end up liking everybody,” she said, “at least one can like some of them.”

“Yes, but are you going to continue to like them?”

She considered this. “Over the years?”

“Yes. We change as we get older. And that means, surely, that we’ll…” He hesitated. “I know this sounds a bit—how shall I put it?—dismissive, but the people you like when you’re fourteen or fifteen may not be the same sort of people you’ll like when you’re thirty.” He looked at her inquiringly. “Are you still in close touch with any friends you had at that age? You aren’t, are you?”

Isabel thought for a moment. There must be somebody, and yet she could not think of a name. She still saw people she had met at twenty,

but fourteen or fifteen…Where were her childhood friends? “That may be accidental,” she said. “We lose touch with people for all sorts of reasons—not just because we become different people.”

Jamie smiled. This was a familiar topic—one that he and Isabel had discussed at length before. Are we the same person at forty as we are at fourteen? It was Isabel who had introduced him to the philosophical debate on personal identity, and he had enjoyed the abstruse articles on the subject that she had given him. He had learned the philosophical language—and the techniques, and now even read the *Review* with some interest.

“*If* we become different people,” he said.

She held her ground. “We do,” she said. “I’m not the same person I was at eighteen. I’m just not.”

“But you are,” he insisted. “I’ve seen a photograph.”

“Physically—yes. But it’s not just that. We aren’t just our bodies…” She paused. “I have different tastes in music; I think about things differently; the people I liked when I was eighteen are not the sort of people I like today. I’m very, very different.” She thought of John Liamor; she had been in love with him—in a way, in a foolish way—but she could never love him, or anybody at all like him, now.

He shook his head. “That means your tastes have changed. It doesn’t mean that you’re a different person.”

“Doesn’t it? What if I were to say to you that personhood is really a matter of attitudes and emotions and…”

“And memories,” he interjected.

“Yes, and memories too. And if all those things are different, then the person’s different. Oh, there may be some physical elements that are the same—I always imagine that we have pretty much the same skeleton that we started with, so to speak, at the beginning—a bit bigger, maybe, but the same bones.” She paused. “But I wasn’t going to get into a discussion of personal identity; we were talking about class reunions.”

He nodded. “So you’re going to yours?”

“Yes, or rather, it’s coming to me. I’ve agreed to host one of the parties. It’ll be on the Friday night—right at the beginning.”

“Here?”

She had meant to ascertain whether he had any objection, but had forgotten to mention it to him. She hoped that he did not mind twenty-five women, or whatever number it was, coming to the house. The others would not have their partners with them, and Jamie, if he attended, would be the only man. They would love him, of course, and at least some of them would feel envy towards her—unless they

had grown up, and could cope with the sight of one of their number with a much younger man, even if all those years ago they had whispered amongst themselves that she—Isabel—would never find a man. *Too brainy, you know—it puts men off. I swear it does. That's not what men are looking for*. She had overheard one such conversation, and the laughter that had followed it, and she had smarted over it. Who had said it? Even now she remembered: it was Claire Sutherland, whom she had disliked on that account; Claire, who always spelled out her name when introduced. *Claire with an* i *and an* e*, please, not the other stupid ways of spelling it;* Claire, whose uncle had married a minor film star, whose name she dropped into almost every conversation; Claire, who had had no shortage of boyfriends but had them, Isabel remembered thinking, because she had lived up to the nickname some sniggering boys had coined for her, as vulgar and unkind as it was clichéd: *Town Bicycle.*

Claire Sutherland's name was on the list the organizer had sent—misspelled, as it happened—and Isabel had imagined with some satisfaction how she might introduce Jamie to her and how her eyes—and she remembered that Claire had small, piggy eyes—would narrow with jealousy when she laid eyes on him. And Isabel would say, "Claire, this is my *husband,"* which would cause a further narrowing of the eyes.

She had stopped herself. This was not the way in which we should allow our thoughts to run, she reminded herself; class reunions should not be marred by feelings of jealousy or triumph; should not be, yes, but she suspected that they often were. Class reunions were about curiosity; about satisfaction at the avoidance of the mistakes of one's contemporaries, now revealed in their emerging life histories; about reflecting on the ravages—and injustices—of time; and of realizing, perhaps, how strange and random are the twists and turns of fate.

"Yes," she said. "The inaugural party's going to be here. I hope you don't mind."

He seemed surprised. "Why should I mind?"

She shrugged. "All those girls together, talking about times past."

"Irresistible," he said, smiling. "I can't wait."

Chapter Two

When Isabel told her niece, Cat, about the reunion, Cat revealed that she had already heard about it.

"Oh, I know about that," she said. "That woman who comes in here from time to time—you know the one—her husband is something to do with the Bank of Scotland and who wrote that very tedious book about gardening…Her. She was in here and told me about it. She knows that you and I are related."

In her mind's eye, Isabel saw the cover of *The Scottish Garden from Spring to Autumn.* She named the author. "Alice Macfarlane."

Cat nodded. "That's her."

"I rather like her gardening book," said Isabel. "It had a very good review in *The Scotsman*."

Cat shrugged. "All right." But then she added. "Reviewed by a gardener, I suppose."

"What do you expect?" asked Isabel.

They were talking in the office of her delicatessen; a jar of pickles, half eaten, stood on top of a pile of papers. Cat twisted off the top and extracted one with her bare fingers. "Gardeners scratch one another's backs. And anyway, a garden book…" She did not finish, but the dismissal was clear enough.

This is ridiculous, thought Isabel. *Somebody grew that pickle for you —in his garden.* She felt a growing irritation. It was all very well for Cat to condescend to somebody who had written a gardening book, but what had she herself done? What made her think she was superior to those who wrote books about gardening?

"I admire people who write practical books," said Isabel. "And, now I think of it, I imagine that you like books by people who run delis. Look at those lovely books by Mary Contini. You like those, don't you?"

Mary Contini and her husband owned an Edinburgh delicatessen that had become something of an institution. They supplied cheese to the Queen, and held concerts of Neapolitan music in their back room.

“You like her books, don’t you?’ Isabel pressed.

But Cat did not answer the question. She usually changed the subject if Isabel tried to pin her down and she did that now. “About this reunion of yours,” she remarked. “Alice Macfarlane is not looking forwards to it.”

“No?”

“No. She’s not against the *idea* of a reunion—it’s not that. The idea’s all right.”

Isabel waited. It seemed to her that Cat was being deliberately abstruse.

“No, it’s not that,” Cat continued. “It’s one person in particular she’s got a bizz against.”

Bizz was a Scots word. Like many Scots expressions it had a special pithiness. A bizz was a feeling of focused animosity; a grudge could be described as a bizz, but bizz was a far more flexible term. A bizz could be a serious resentment or something altogether more minor—a feeling of impatience that might pass in a moment of forgiveness or forgetfulness.

“Oh well,” said Isabel, “the dislikes of childhood can linger. Who was that girl you weren’t too fond of when you were at school? Helena something. Remember?”

Cat winced. “She was awful. Nobody liked her—it wasn’t just me, I can tell you.” She paused. “No, this woman Alice Macfarlane mentioned was called Barbara Grant.”

Isabel frowned. Barbara Grant? And then she remembered; yes, Barbara had not been popular. There had been issues with some members of the class, but Isabel could not remember exactly what they were. She herself had had few dealings with Barbara, but then that was what school was like: you could spend years with the same people and not get to know them very well.

“Alice said she had no time for Barbara,” Cat continued, “and had only accepted after they’d told her that Barbara Grant wasn’t going to be there. But apparently she changed her mind and she’s coming after all.”

Isabel was silent. Then she said, “She’s entitled to turn up. She was in that year.”

“Well, yes,” conceded Cat. “But you’d think that somebody like her would stay away.”

Isabel wanted to say, *But you’ve never met her. How can you say that?* She restrained herself. “I’m not sure what Alice has against Barbara,” she said. “She may not have liked her for some reason, but that’s no justification for us to—”

Cat cut her short. “She was a bully. Alice told me.”

Isabel shrugged. “We don’t know for sure,” she said. “It may just have been that she and Alice didn’t hit it off. Or Alice may have thought that Barbara was bullying her when she wasn’t really.”

Cat looked scornful. “I don’t think so,” she said.

Isabel persisted. “She may have changed. Perhaps we can give her the benefit of the doubt.”

It was as if Cat had not heard her. “She said that she still had the occasional nightmare about Barbara. Even now.”

It was over twenty years ago. But Isabel knew that nightmares could have deeper roots even than that. She still very occasionally dreamed of something that had happened to her when she eight or nine—the running over of her cat, with the broken furry body being brought in by the driver, a neighbor, apologetically. In the scale of childhood traumas it was far from the worst that could happen; children lost their parents before their very eyes, saw their homes being burned down, were the victims of almost inconceivable cruelty. The loss of a cat was nothing to this, but nightmares were no respecters of proportion.

“Well, even if she was a bully,” said Isabel, “surely the odds are that she grew out of it. And she may be sorry about it all—that’s a distinct possibility, you know.”

“Alice Macfarlane said that she never apologized. She said that she could have done something to make up for it, but didn’t.”

“Oh well,” said Isabel. “Perhaps she’s going to do so now.”

Cat shook her head. “I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“Because hardly anybody apologizes. It’s only when they’re caught and forced to. Even then, they don’t mean it.”

Isabel bit her tongue. Cat could be dogmatic—and ignorant too. “You know there’s such a thing as an apology movement, don’t you?” she said mildly. “It’s quite popular these days. There are plenty of people prepared to say they’re sorry.”

“I bet *she* won’t,” said Cat. “But let me know if I’m wrong. Let me know if she stands up and says that she regrets everything she did.”

Isabel suspected that Cat was right; if Barbara Grant had indeed been a bully—it was unlikely that she was coming to apologize. It was far more likely that she had simply put her bullying out of her mind. She might even be surprised that anybody remembered her as a bully. People reinvented themselves, writing out of their personal histories those episodes of which they felt ashamed. *And why should they not?* thought Isabel. What had Eliot said? “Human kind cannot bear too

much reality." That was true—especially so when it came to the reality of ourselves.

She did not express these thoughts to Cat, but that evening she added Barbara Grant's name to the list and underlined it—twice. She was not sure why she did it, but the act of writing Barbara's name—a simple listing of a name—seemed to move something within her, and she felt suddenly ashamed of herself. Unless we do something about the past, she thought, then it will weigh us down to such an extent that we simply cannot move. Is that what I want?

She went out into the garden. The evening sun dappled through the leaves of the oak tree that now towered higher than the house itself. A wind breathed through the branches, gently, almost too gently to move the foliage. Isabel thought *If, as they say, you were a bully, I forgive you, Barbara Grant. By this deliberate act, here in this garden, I forgive you.* She turned around and as she did so the thought came to her: Barbara Grant might not want forgiveness, may not think that it was required. And if some people did not want to be forgiven, should we forgive them none the less?

Chapter Three

The organization of the reunion had been undertaken by a committee of two, a *cabal*, as they called themselves. “The word *committee* is far too grand for us,” said Eleanor Williams, whose idea the reunion had been. She spoke with a deliberate archness. “We’re a cabal—a junta, perhaps—acting in the interests of all, of course, but unelected—as all the best cabals are.”

She met Isabel in La Barantine, a small French bakery and coffee shop in Bruntsfield, only ten minutes’ walk from Isabel’s house. Isabel remembered Eleanor as a quiet, studious girl, always praised by teachers, to the slight irritation of her classmates, for her neat and methodical work. Isabel thought that if anybody could arrange a well-planned reunion it would be Eleanor—and here she was, sitting opposite her at the table, three neatly labeled files laid out before her: *Catering, Social Activities, Financial.* Isabel repressed a smile, she recalled such files from school—Eleanor had one for each of her subjects and one labeled *Sundry* that she had never explained and that had been the subject of some discussion among the other members of the class. *Boys*, said one of the girls. *Eleanor files information on boys*. This had been greeted with mirth; Eleanor was never boy mad, unlike Claire Sutherland. But Isabel put that thought out of her mind; she would not condemn Claire Sutherland forever on the basis of an…an enthusiastic youth.

Eleanor had wanted to discuss catering for the Friday evening party —the one that Isabel had agreed to host. “We don’t want you to be put out in the slightest,” she said. “I know you offered to do the food but…”

“My husband is a very keen cook,” said Isabel. “It would be no trouble.”

Eleanor looked at her with what seemed to be disbelief. “I’m sure he is.”

“He really is,” said Isabel. “You’d be surprised.”

“Oh, I know that some husbands can cook,” said Eleanor. “My own husband, alas, is of zero use in the kitchen. Zero.” Disbelief changed to

wistful envy. “But the point is this: we really don’t want you to be put to any trouble. We want you to enjoy the occasion just as much as the rest of us. If you’re worrying about what’s going on in the kitchen, then you won’t be able to relax, will you?”

She answered her own question. “You will not. So we’ve budgeted for caterers. There’s a young couple I know who have started up a catering business. They do weddings and parties and so on, and their charges are very reasonable. I’ve brought some suggested menus to show you. We need to choose. Then I’ll pay a deposit and they’ll come round and talk through the details with you. They’ll need to know what you have in the kitchen, and so on.”

Isabel repeated her offer, but Eleanor’s mind, it seemed, was made up and the only outstanding question was that of the menu. She showed Isabel the caterers’ list of buffet dishes.

“Any of these will do,” said Isabel. “Shrimp curry?”

Eleanor shook her head. “Will stain,” she said. “If it’s a buffet people will be balancing plates on their knees and they’ll be bound to spill. I’ve ruined hundreds of dresses that way—hundreds!”

Isabel raised an eyebrow. But then Eleanor repeated, “Hundreds—completely ruined. Bleach doesn’t work on turmeric, you know.” She looked at Isabel as if challenging her to refute this piece of wisdom, but Isabel did not. Instead, spotting another item on the list, she said, “Seafood quiche. Nobody can object to quiche.”

Eleanor was not so sure. “Not everybody likes seafood. People may have had a bad experience with oysters or whatever and it puts them off seafood for life.”

“You choose then,” said Isabel. “I’m sure that I’ll like what you choose.”

They settled on three main options: vegetarian quiche, a venison stew, and a Lebanese chicken dish that involved raisins and couscous. Dessert would be apple meringue pie and mango sorbet. Isabel agreed to them all without demur—“You’re very easy to please,” remarked Eleanor. “You weren’t like that at school, were you?”

Isabel was unsure what she meant. Eleanor’s remark bordered on the rude. “I don’t think I was all that fussy,” she said mildly.

“Oh you were, darling. You were terribly fussy. I remember.”

“Well, if you say so,” said Isabel.

They moved on to wine: Eleanor had strong views on the mark-up the caterers expected; Cava would be served first as an aperitif and then they would move on to an Australian sauvignon blanc that she said would not break the bank. “My husband quaffs that stuff by the *gallon*,” she said. “He must get through hundreds of gallons a year.”

Obviously not fussy, thought Isabel. And then she thought: I have nothing against Eleanor, but can I really say that I *like* her? She could not, and she felt in a moment of clarity, touched with shame: we pretend to people that we like them, we spend time with them and put a brave face on it—while they may be feeling exactly the same way about us. But surely all this is a waste of everybody's time—this pretense of positive feeling where none exists.

Eleanor shuffled her papers back into their file. Her expression became grave; she lowered her gaze. Isabel studied her. Eleanor was weighing up whether to say something, she thought, and she had a good idea what that might be.

"Barbara Grant," Isabel said. "I hear she's coming after all."

Eleanor looked up sharply. "You've heard that?"

Isabel explained how Alice MacFarlane had mentioned it to Cat. Eleanor listened and then shook her head. "This city is such a village," she said. "Nothing—nothing at all—is ever kept confidential."

"Well, surely it hardly matters who knows who's coming. It's not exactly a state secret."

A shadow passed over Eleanor's face. "But it does matter, Isabel," she snapped. "If everybody knows that Barbara is coming, then it might put people off. There are plenty who would say, *If that woman's going to be there, then count me out.*"

"Surely not."

Eleanor's voice rose sharply. "Surely, yes. People can't stand her, you know. Remember that time we went to Abbotsford on the school bus and nobody would sit next to her? And the teachers had to come and force people to take those seats."

Isabel squirmed. Barbara may have been a bully, but there was more than one form of cruelty. "That was a long time ago," she said. "She may well be an entirely different person today."

"I doubt it," said Eleanor. "What do they say about a leopard changing its spots?" She paused. "You were always far too charitable. I suppose it's a virtue, but I'm afraid most of us are less prepared to forget what Barbara Grant was like."

Isabel wondered what had happened to Barbara in the intervening years. "Didn't she go abroad? I seem to remember hearing that she did."

"I believe she went to Australia," said Eleanor. "I heard something about her marrying an Australian and going off to live in Melbourne. I thought she was still there, but obviously not."

"Or she may be coming back just for this," suggested Isabel.

"Highly unlikely," said Eleanor. "Why come all that way just to see

people who can't stand the sight of you?"

"Well, she's coming," said Isabel. "So we may as well try to make the best of it."

Eleanor appeared to consider this. She sighed. "I shall avoid her."

"You can't."

"Oh, I won't cut her dead, but I shan't make an effort. I'm not going to be all pally with somebody whom I regard as being responsible for Jenny Maxwell's death."

Isabel's eyes widened. "What?"

"For Jenny Maxwell's death," Eleanor repeated.

Isabel struggled to remind herself of the facts. She had not thought of Jenny Maxwell for years. "But Jenny committed suicide, didn't she? Five or six years after we left school, wasn't it?"

"Four and a half years," said Eleanor.

"Well wasn't that over some man?" asked Isabel. "The story I heard was that she had a boyfriend who was carrying on with somebody else and then Jenny found them in bed together—it was in the Roxburghe Hotel, I believe. That was what happened, wasn't it?"

"Roughly," said Eleanor. "It wasn't the Roxburghe, by the way. It was one of the bigger hotels."

Isabel looked at her hands. She had no idea why she had brought the Roxburghe Hotel into the conversation; the detail was so irrelevant. What could it possibly matter where Jenny Maxwell had found her lover *in flagrante delicto*? But even as she thought this, the scene came vividly to her mind. Jenny Maxwell, who always looked untidy, rushing down a hotel corridor, hair all over the place, clothes unkempt, arriving breathless and outraged at the guilty door. Did she knock? Or did she push it open, perhaps shoulder it, or even use a credit card to open the lock, as people did on the screen—and then find the guilty couple, sheets pulled up to their chins. Would that all have happened in a slightly different way according to the hotel in which the dalliance occurred? Perhaps infidelity had a different complexion in the larger, less respectable hotels, where all sorts of things could be expected to happen, and presumably did.

She was jolted out of her reverie by Eleanor. "Are you still with me?"

"Of course. Sorry. I was thinking of Jenny."

"He was an electrician," said Eleanor. "He came to her flat to fix something."

"Who?"

"Her lover—the man who was carrying on with the other woman."

Isabel wanted the conversation to end, but felt herself being drawn

in. “Dangerous.”

Eleanor adjusted her files on the desk—fussily, thought Isabel. “Dangerous being an electrician? They very rarely get shocks. They’re very careful about turning things off.”

“It wasn’t that,” said Isabel. “It was more a question of the danger of getting involved with somebody who comes to the house to fix something. It’s like falling in love with the waiter. It’s not going to work.”

Eleanor appeared to consider this. “When I was seventeen I fell in love with a waiter. We went to Crieff Hydro for a week—the whole family—and there was a student working there during the summer. I suppose he was about eighteen or nineteen—a year older than me. He was studying physics at Edinburgh University. He was drop-dead gorgeous.” She gave Isabel a coy glance. “It was my first…my first experience, so to speak.”

Isabel looked away. She did not want to hear the details. She had always taken the view that although one might talk about the sexual activities of others, one did not talk about one’s own. It was a question of privacy and trust: the other person was entitled not to have a private moment disclosed to all and sundry. The juvenile adage *Never kiss and tell* had a sound moral instinct behind it.

“Well,” she said. “These things happen.”

But Eleanor was not ready to abandon the subject. “He was called Clive,” she said. “He played rugby for St. Andrews University.”

Clive, thought Isabel. It was not her favorite name; she had known a Clive who had been a drinking companion of John Liamor. He enjoyed making snide remarks about people. She had not liked him, and now all Clives—unfairly, she admitted—had a presumption to overcome.

She said nothing, but looked over Eleanor’s shoulder to see if she could attract the attention of one of the staff. She would pay for the coffee, which would prevent any further disclosures about Clive and bring their meeting to an end.

But Eleanor had not finished. “He was a real looker,” she said.

Isabel nodded politely. “I suppose that being a rugby player he was…”

“Terrifically strong,” said Eleanor. “Yes, he was. And there’s something interesting about strong men, you know—the really strong ones. They’re gentle. Especially in bed.”

Isabel tried desperately to catch the eye of the young man behind the counter. He looks strong, she thought, but I only want to pay for the coffee—that’s all.

“I shouldn’t be telling you this,” said Eleanor, collecting herself.

"No," said Isabel, trying to smile. "Perhaps you shouldn't."

"It's just that when you have a memory that's particularly…how shall I put it…particularly significant, then you want to share it, don't you?"

"Yes, but…"

"It was on a hillside," Eleanor went on. "He had the night off. It was summer and you know those long summer evenings when it never really gets dark."

"That's because of our latitude, of course," said Isabel valiantly. "I saw people playing tennis at eleven o'clock the other night. Or not quite eleven, but close enough. It was at that tennis club on Polwarth Terrace—you know the one where they have those all-weather courts. Do you play tennis, Eleanor?"

The question went unanswered. Some questions, thought Isabel, are unanswered because of complexity or ambiguity—but not this one. One either played tennis or one did not. There was no room for verbal feinting or obfuscation. "We went for a walk together," Eleanor continued. "I felt as if I was floating. I remember it so vividly. We went up a path from behind the hotel and we disturbed a deer. He was standing at the edge of the path, in a clump of bracken…"

"Did you know that bracken's thought to be carcinogenic at certain times of the year," said Isabel. "It's the spores. I hope you didn't lie down in the bracken, Eleanor. One wouldn't want to have a carcinogenic first experience."

She stopped herself. Eleanor was looking at her reproachfully.

"I'm so sorry," said Isabel. "It's just that I have to get back."

Eleanor sniffed. "I still blame Barbara for what happened to Jenny Maxwell. I just do. She took an overdose, you know."

"I suppose that sometimes happens. People can be very upset. It happens."

"Not very often," said Eleanor. "If you discover your man's unfaithful, you don't go off and take an overdose—not normally. No, she did it because her self-confidence, her feelings of self-worth, had been ruined by Barbara Grant. So when she encountered this little difficulty with her man, then she must have fallen to pieces. And that, I'd say, could be laid fairly and squarely at Barbara's door."

Isabel sat back in her chair. "I don't think so," she said. "You just can't link things like that. Causation is much more subtle…" She stopped herself; she was beginning to sound like the philosopher she was.

"Well, I blame her," said Eleanor. "She ruined lives, and that was one that she ruined quite conclusively." She paused, fixing Isabel with

a challenging look. “As far as I’m concerned, I have no interest in what she may or may not have become. The damage was done a long time ago—she can’t undo that and neither, I’m afraid, can we.”

Isabel wondered whether she would argue, but decided against it. She had told Eleanor of her disagreement, but she did not think that she could say much more. And she had now begun to doubt even her own recollection of events. She remembered Barbara being involved in arguments with people; she remembered her having a reputation for making cutting remarks, but was she the incorrigible bully that others seemed to remember? Perhaps she had been, she thought; perhaps I just didn’t notice it because I wasn’t one of her victims.

“Let’s do what we can,” she muttered. “Let’s wait and see what she’s like.”

“We know what she’s like.”

Isabel looked at her watch. “I really should be getting home,” she said. “I have…” She had nothing to do, and the lie would not come easily. So she said, instead, “I have nothing to do.”

Eleanor did not catch the remark. “Of course, you must be very busy.”

“Not really,” said Isabel.

But Eleanor again did not appear to take in what she said, and Isabel thought: *We hear what we expect to hear*. But even if she had been heard correctly, it would have made no difference: people decided what they thought and would not be moved, not even by the most patient, the most rational argument. This was why it was so difficult to shift those who lived their lives according to a religious or political ideology. Such people tended not to change even in the face of the most compelling argument.

Isabel rose to her feet and extended her hand to Eleanor. Eleanor took it, squeezed it lightly, and then she too stood up. “Dearest Isabel,” she said, looking fondly at the other woman. “If I were a man I’d fall head over heels for you, you know.”

Isabel was unprepared for this. “Well, that’s kind…”

The waiter appeared. Eleanor looked up at him, and then at Isabel. But Isabel did not engage. Instead she took the bill and passed a five-pound note and a few coins to the young man. Taking the money, he smiled, and then exchanged a glance with Eleanor.

“Goodbye,” said Isabel, rising to her feet. “Let me know when the caterers will need access. And so on.”

“And so on,” echoed Eleanor. “So we list the events of our lives—and so on. *Und so weiter.* And so on.”

Isabel turned to leave. Try as she might, she was finding herself

increasingly keen to get away from Eleanor. There was something in her manner—a certain archness, perhaps—that grated. There was an assumption of familiarity—of intimacy, perhaps—that simply did not exist. *Why did she imagine I would be interested in her early sexual experiences?* That conversation, in particular, had been excruciating, and Eleanor had failed to pick up—or had deliberately ignored—every cue that Isabel had given to change the subject. But then she smiled to herself: for most of us there was a central, unavoidable problem—the world was populated by people who were *unlike us*. That explained so many wars—particularly religious ones; that explained persecutions and injustices; that explained simple everyday irritation with one's fellow man: *They were just not like us.*

The reflection helped. A class reunion brought together all types and she should just accept that. If somebody wanted to talk to somebody else about her first boyfriend, then why not simply listen? Tolerance: that was what was needed for class reunions, just as it was for everything else we did. Tolerance was like one of those soothing creams—it drew out inflammation, it did away with the pain.

When she reached home, Isabel found the list of those attending her reunion—the list on which she had drawn the two red lines beneath Barbara Grant's name. Now she took out her red pen and under the name of Eleanor Williams she drew two straight lines in red, and then, for good measure, a third. But then she suddenly felt bad. Underlining the names of others with a red pen was not the act of a tolerant person. It was like the act of a bigot who addresses the world in capital letters—who shouts, even in print. So she took her black pen and scored out the red lines under each of the two names. It was a simple act of cancellation, but it worked. She could face both Barbara Grant—whom she had already forgiven—and Eleanor Williams with complete equanimity. They were welcome at her Friday party, and when they arrived she would make a point of kissing them on both cheeks, and meaning it. In theory.

Chapter Four

The opening party was due to start at seven in the evening. The caterers had arrived in the midafternoon, though, when Isabel was still at her desk, reading proofs of the *Review of Applied Ethics*. It was a slightly disappointing issue, she thought—a ragbag of articles that she had been sitting on for too long and that she had to publish before their authors gave up all hope, retired or died. She had made a joke to herself of that, but even as she did so she remembered, with a pang, Gareth Crainie, an Irish philosopher. He had written a paper on the ethical implications of climate change; it had been a well-written paper and extensively footnoted, but it had failed to engage her interest. She had agreed to publish it, though, even if she had not given a firm commitment as to when it would appear. Later it had slipped into what she called her "deep guilt pile" and there it languished until in a fit of determination to clear the backlog she had brought it out, dusted it down and put it into the New Opinions section of a forthcoming issue.

That done, she had written to the author to let him know that his article would be appearing and to apologize for the long time it had taken her to publish it, although she knew she had no real excuse. The answer to this letter came from the author's partner, who informed her of the philosopher's death. "Gareth died eight months ago," he wrote. "It is such a pity that this will be a posthumous publication as he had been so looking forwards to seeing it in print. He spent a lot of time on it, you know, and he was thrilled when you agreed to publish it. Now he will never see it, although he did understand how long these things can take—too long sometimes. We were together for a long time, by the way: thirty-seven years, in fact. Of those thirty-seven years, many were spent in the shadow of disapproval and exclusion. Some of that was open, some of it was concealed; but it was always there, in the days when this country was so rotten and hypocritical. There was a bishop, you know, who actually tried to have Gareth removed from his teaching post at the university on the grounds that he would corrupt young people. A bishop! And now…Sorry, I shouldn't talk about all that as it has nothing to do with you, but we

felt—both Gareth and I—that when you wrote and told him that you would publish his paper you somehow became a friend. We liked the way you phrased your letter. It was kind. There we are: nothing more to be said, really, but thank you for what you did."

She had learned her lesson and now, in every fourth issue, she published the papers that were waiting in the queue. It worked, and the guilt pile largely disappeared, even if it made the contents of those mopping-up issues seem somewhat random.

As she went up to the bedroom to change for the party, Jamie appeared. He had been putting Charlie to bed, Isabel having said good night to him after his bath.

"He's utterly exhausted," said Jamie. "He went to sleep the moment his head touched the pillow. There was no time even for his story."

"The benefits of a clear conscience," said Isabel. "That's why children sleep so well." She thought of the guilt pile. At least she had looked that in the face.

Jamie asked her whether she had finished the proofs. "Get those out of the way and you can relax. Enjoy the reunion."

Isabel smiled. "I wonder whether anybody's relaxing. I suspect that everybody's on tenterhooks."

"Oh well," said Jamie. "I'm sure it's all going to go very smoothly. The caterers have been working like slaves all afternoon."

Isabel slipped out of her jeans and fingered the dress hanging on the wardrobe door. Too formal? "Slavery," she mused. "As it happens we're doing an article on that. Slavery and reparation. It's in those proofs I've just been reading."

Jamie sat down on the bedroom chair, a low red armchair in need of reupholstering. It had been Isabel's mother's bedroom chair, and her grandmother's before that. It had originally come from Mobile, she had been told, and it had become for Isabel a link with that distant, romantic world of the house in Mobile with its live oaks and its hanging moss, a house that she associated, oddly enough, with faded fabrics, eau de cologne and mint juleps. Those were, of course, the texture and scents of her grandmother, whom she had met only on a couple of occasions as a young girl.

"Slavery?" said Jamie.

"Yes. We're publishing a paper on contemporary slavery."

"But I thought…"

"…slavery was abolished? It was, but not everywhere. It's just less overt now."

"So no slave markets."

Isabel fingered the fabric of her dress again. It was silk, and she

wondered who had woven it. She imagined a large factory somewhere far away, with great clattering machines, and people whose faces she could not see. We just cannot imagine any longer where things come from. The label says *China,* but where in China? And in what conditions were they made? She looked down, at the oriental carpet on the bedroom floor, she realized that she was not sure about that either. There were children employed in carpet factories in Asia; they were very small children who sometimes worked long days on the repetitive tasks of weaving. Were they slaves?

For a moment she experienced a feeling of pervading bleakness: the world was a vale of tears—it always had been. Only civilization stood between us and the horror: civilization in the form of art and architecture, philosophy and courtesy, and all the institutions that persuaded us to treat one another with decency and consideration, and, of course, tolerance. But those institutions were much weaker than we imagined and could be blown away with a puff of cynicism. It was so easy, and so effective: to pour scorn on something was like pouring acid on it. It ate it away.

Isabel looked at her dress, and for a moment the sheer burden of her thoughts overcame her. She was immensely fortunate—she had this house, this child, this sympathetic man, this refined world of ideas—but the great sea of unhappiness and struggle that was the world was still there, too large to be dealt with, too intractable to submit to our tiny interventions, our metaphorical fingers in the dykes. She could do so little, and when she had done what she could, the anguish of the world would still be there: as insistent and reproachful as when she had started.

Jamie was at her side. He had risen from the red chair and was standing beside her. He put an arm about her shoulder.

"My darling Isabel."

She half-turned away. She did not want him to see her tears.

He touched her cheek gently. "What is it? Is it because of what goes on in the world? Is that it?"

She nodded. It was—to an extent—but not entirely. Their discussion had been the catalyst, but it was so much more than that, and she could not begin to explain it to him, with a party starting downstairs in less than an hour, and hair to be washed, and clothes to be put on, and makeup.

He put his other arm about her. "You can't worry about everything, can you?"

"I know. You're right." He had passed her a handkerchief and she took it. "It's just that I look at the world and realize that all the things that we create for ourselves—the culture, the beliefs, and so on—all of

that is just an attempt to protect us from the reality of our situation. Our world is a tiny, insignificant thing in a massive explosion, hurtling wherever it is we're meant to be hurtling; and we cling to one another on our little raft and try to be brave, but…"

He looked at her with surprise. "But everybody knows that. We just have to ignore it. We just have to pretend it's not so. What else can we do?"

"Yes, I suppose you're right."

He took the handkerchief from her and dabbed at her cheeks. "So don't cry. Because I love you, you know."

She looked at him. "I know that." She paused. She was collecting herself. "I hope those caterers have enough food."

"Of course they have. They're very professional."

He had moved a hand down to her back. She shivered, and held him to her. Holding him was somehow the solution, or was at least part of it.

"I need to have a shower."

He kissed her lightly on the brow. "So do I." He paused for a moment, and then whispered, "*Tutti*."

She smiled.

"The musical term," he said, "for all together. In this case, just together. *Tutti*."

The cabal arrived first, in the shape of Eleanor Williams and a woman whom Isabel only vaguely remembered: this was the other organizer, Margaret Milne. Eleanor seemed ebullient and quizzed the caterers with a series of searching questions. Then she turned to Margaret and gave her a series of instructions. Her tone was somewhat peremptory—even high-handed, but Margaret listened meekly and went off to do as she was instructed. Isabel watched bemused: Eleanor had been very ready to accuse Barbara Grant of bullying, but she could imagine her being something of a bully herself.

"Well now," said Eleanor. "The means by which we shall know who's who—just in case the years have been too ravaging." She smiled. "You, of course, have kept your looks, Isabel." She paused, and seemed to look intently at Isabel's face and neck. "It's always interesting to speculate as to whether people have submitted to the surgeon's knife in pursuit of continued youthfulness."

Isabel took a deep breath. The effrontery was astonishing, but she would not allow herself to be riled by Eleanor.

"If people feel it helps," she said mildly, "then it's up to them, isn't it?" Now came the chance for a small riposte. She struggled with the temptation, and yielded. "You haven't, have you, Eleanor?"

Eleanor stiffened, and Isabel immediately regretted her remark. But then the other woman smiled. “Very funny!” she said, and she delved into a bag she had brought with her and took out a plastic container of name badges.

Eleanor held up one of the badges to show Isabel. “We thought—Margaret and I—that we should all wear these name badges this evening and then not bother for the rest of the weekend. We’ll know who’s who by then.”

Isabel indicated the hall table. “You can lay them out there. I’ll give you a hand.” She disliked name badges, particularly those that required one to peer closely to read. These, at least, were legible without the infringement of personal space; Eleanor had written out the name of each guest and had put, in brackets, the married name by which she might be known.

She explained her system: “If they’re divorced but still using their married name, I’ve put that in square brackets. If they’re still with their husband, I’ve put it in round brackets.”

“I see.”

“And if they’re divorced, but have gone back to their maiden name, then that’s all that’s on the badge.”

Isabel said that she thought that perfectly logical.

“And as for shortenings of names,” Eleanor elaborated, “I’ve not done that. Liz is Elizabeth. Maggie is Margaret—and so on. Just like it was at school when they called the register.”

Isabel glanced at one of the labels. There had been a girl whom everybody—even the teachers—had called Toffee Martinson. She had become Angela Martinson [Peabody], which revealed her matrimonial history, but did not identify her as most of the guests would—as Toffee, who indeed was famous for her insatiable taste for toffee.

“Here’s Toffee,” said Isabel.

Eleanor glanced at the badge. “Yes, that’s her. I shudder to think of the state of her teeth.”

Isabel remembered Toffee Martinson, doubled up with embarrassment, when asked a question in a physics class, and being unable to reply because her teeth were momentarily stuck together with the clandestine toffee she had been eating. She was about to mention this incident when Eleanor pointed to another badge: *Dr. Jane Durrell.*

“The only doctor in our whole year,” said Eleanor. She glanced at Isabel, the tiniest of smiles playing about her lips. “Sorry, I mean, *real* doctor.”

Isabel said nothing; she rarely, if ever, referred to her doctorate, so

the barb was misplaced. She could correct her and say that medical doctors were relative newcomers to the title—doctors in the early days of universities were doctors of everything *except* medicine. She settled for a bland response. “Well, at least we shall have medical help on hand if there’s an emergency.”

“Actually, she’s a psychiatrist,” said Eleanor.

“Then she could be of help if anybody has an attack of Stendhal syndrome.”

“But, as I said, she’s a psychiatrist.”

Isabel gritted her teeth. The rudeness she had glimpsed on their first meeting at La Barantine now seemed to have resurfaced. *I am the hostess*, she thought. *This is my house. You do not offend the hostess.*

“Stendhal syndrome,” Isabel said quietly, “is a psychiatric condition. It occurs when people find themselves in the presence of great art. Visitors to Florence often get it. People become short of breath. They faint. They get hysterical.”

Eleanor listened, but seemed unimpressed. “Highly unlikely,” she said.

Isabel stared at her. Was she doubting the reality of Stendhal syndrome, or was she saying that it was highly unlikely that anybody would get it in this house? *Not beautiful enough. Victorian architecture—the wrong proportions for Stendhal syndrome.*

Isabel noticed something. “Claire Sutherland,” she said, picking up one of the badges.

Eleanor made a face. “I wonder how many husbands she’s had. You’ll see that I put a married name for her in brackets, but heaven knows whether he’s current, or the one before the last.”

“Actually, I was thinking more of the spelling,” said Isabel. “You’ve put Clare, as in Clare College, Cambridge. Our Claire was always very fussy about her *i* and her *e*.”

“Too late,” said Eleanor dismissively. “And it doesn’t matter, anyway. It’s clear enough who she is.”

“Clear?” said Isabel.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

The badges were now all laid out neatly on the hall table. Eleanor took hers and pinned it on the lapel of the jacket she was wearing. She picked up Isabel’s badge and passed it to her. As she did so, she fumbled and pricked Isabel’s finger with the pin.

She apologized profusely. “Oh, no. I’m so sorry. I’m nervous, I suppose. What a thing to do…”

Isabel sucked her finger. “That’s all right. No harm done.” She

stared at Eleanor. Suddenly they were twelve again. It was deliberate, she thought. She meant that. Eleanor met her eye, and blushed. That proves it, thought Isabel; one doesn't blush over an accident; one blushes when found out.

One of the caterers came into the hall to seek their advice, and they accompanied him into the kitchen. He was a young New Zealander, fresh-faced and cheerful, whose spoken sentences ascended at the end, making each a question.

"The canapés are almost ready?" he said.

The intonation made it difficult to decide whether he was asking or telling them something.

Isabel decided it was the latter. "Good."

"But what I wondered was whether we can put the vegetarian ones on the same plate as the non-vegetarian ones?"

Eleanor took control. "Put them together. People shouldn't be so fussy."

Isabel caught her breath. This was *her* kitchen. "No," she said. "I think there are people who don't like them mixed up like that. There are more plates in that cupboard over there if you need them."

"Righty oh?" said the young man.

Eleanor shook her head. "Unnecessary," she said. "Put them together. It's simpler. It'll make them easier to hand round."

Isabel decided that a line had been crossed. "No, separate plates please." And to Eleanor she said, "As the hostess, I feel I should…"

Eleanor glared at her. "It's the reunion, really, that is the host here. You very kindly offered…"

"…to host the occasion," said Isabel. "So I think we'll have separate plates."

The young man grinned. He was waiting for his final instruction. Isabel crossed the floor to the cupboard and took out half a dozen plates. "Here we are," she said. "These can be vegetarian, and those can be for meat and fish."

She felt the young man's eyes on her. Then, after glancing quickly at Eleanor, he began to busy himself with placing the canapés on the appropriate plate.

"Good," said Isabel briskly. "That's settled that." She looked at her watch. "Five minutes to go."

They were slow to arrive, even allowing for the passage of the statutory fifteen minutes. But then, almost all at once, taxis drew up at the front gate and disgorged their passengers. Eleanor and Margaret met them at the front door, showing them—rather officiously, thought Isabel—to the table where their name badge was waiting. Coats were

taken by the young man from New Zealand, who said "Good evening?" to each guest as she arrived. Then they made their way into the large downstairs drawing room, where another member of the catering team stood with a tray of glasses of Cava.

If there was any ice to be broken, it was thin and did not take long to break. The level of noise in the room rose steadily—the murmur of conversation being interrupted by occasional shrieks of laughter or surprise. As the party got under way, Isabel looked around the room. All the name badges had been collected, so everybody was either there or in the music room, which was accommodating the overflow. So Barbara Grant would have arrived, as would Claire Sutherland.

She saw Claire Sutherland first. From where she was standing Isabel did not have a good view of her face, but she recognized her figure. Claire had been curvaceous—more so than any of the other girls—and she still was. If gravity was planning to strike, it had not done so yet, allowing her to carry off a clinging silk jersey dress to good advantage.

Isabel crossed to join the small group in which Claire was standing. As she approached, Claire detached herself and turned to embrace Isabel, kissing her enthusiastically on each cheek. "So!" she said. "Here we all are! Twenty years!"

"Quite a thought," said Isabel. "It doesn't seem like it, does it?"

"Not at all," said Claire. She peered at Isabel's badge. "You're married, I see. Is he here?"

"Yes," said Isabel. "He'll appear."

Claire smiled. "I seem to recall that you married earlier on. Somebody told me…"

"Yes," said Isabel. "I had a pretty disastrous first marriage. I survived, though."

"As we all do," said Claire. She pointed to her own badge. "They've misspelled my name, you know. I have an *i* and an *e*. People keep leaving it out."

"I remember," said Isabel. "It's annoying when people misspell your name."

"It certainly is," said Claire. "But we shouldn't worry about things like that, I suppose."

"No," said Isabel.

Isabel looked at Claire's badge. "And you're no longer Sutherland, I see."

"I use the name Ross," said Claire. "Michael and I have been married for fifteen years now. We have three children—two boys and a girl."

Isabel suppressed a smile. Claire had settled down; of course she would.

"I've been very lucky," said Claire. "I found the right man."

After a long and active search, thought Isabel; but reproached herself silently and immediately. "I'm so pleased for you," she said. And that was quite true; she was.

Claire leaned forwards. "I must confess that I was a bit…how shall I put it? I was a bit *boy mad* in those days."

"Oh, I don't know," said Isabel. "We all were—in our way."

"Oh but I was a bit of an *enthusiast*. I suspect that I was the first amongst us to have a boyfriend."

Isabel shrugged. "I didn't pay much attention. Maybe you were."

"I was a bit heady," Claire continued. "But after I left university I settled down."

Exhausted, thought Isabel. And then, *No, that's unkind.* So she said, "You met Michael then?"

"Yes. We met on a kibbutz in Israel. It started there."

Isabel was surprised. She had not known that Claire was Jewish.

It was as if Claire had read her mind. "I'm not Jewish," she said. "Or, at least, I wasn't then. I am now. I converted, you see."

"Michael is?"

"Yes, he had a Jewish mother but his father wasn't. He took it up when he was at university and he discovered the Jewish Students' Association. He was looking for something, I suppose, and he discovered that it had been there all along. He decided to go off to spend six months on a kibbutz and it just so happened that I had a Jewish girlfriend who had invited me to go with her. And that was it."

Isabel felt a sudden rush of affection for Claire. She had obviously changed: from enthusiastic promiscuity to Jewish motherhood by way of a kibbutz; it was a heartwarming story.

"Do you do the whole thing?" Isabel asked.

"Oh no," said Claire. "I don't keep a strict kosher kitchen or anything like that. We're very liberal, very reformed. But we always sit down for the meal on Friday evening and light the candles. And it gives our lives structure. We're very happy."

"I can imagine," said Isabel. Then, in return for the confidence, she said, "I'm very happy too. Yet I sometimes I wish I had faith—in the way in which you obviously have it."

Claire reached out and put a hand on Isabel's forearm. "But I don't actually believe…No, put it this way: there is faith and faith. One form of faith is actual practice—the rituals and so on—the other form

of faith involves actually believing in it. They're different things, you know."

Isabel nodded. "Of course. There may be reasons to act as if something were true when you know it isn't."

"Precisely," said Claire. "And you can sink very deeply into your faith. It can keep you afloat. It does that for me, you know." She paused. "So, you're happy then?"

"I wasn't to begin with—when I was with my first husband. I was very unhappy. Now, I've found the most wonderful man and we've had a little boy, and…well, everything is just as I always hoped it would be."

"Men," said Claire, rolling her eyes. "They seem to be vital to our happiness. It's so unfair, isn't it?"

"Only if we let them," said Isabel. "More of us than one imagines we could get by fine without men."

Claire looked doubtful. "I couldn't."

"You might surprise yourself."

Claire made an *oh well* gesture. "Let's talk about something else."

They talked about careers. Isabel explained about the *Review of Applied Ethics* and Claire told Isabel about her practice as an interior designer, but she did not get far, as they were interrupted by the arrival of another woman, who came over to join them. At first Isabel did not recognize her, and nor, it seemed, did Claire. They both looked at the name badge, embarrassed to have to do so, trying not to make their glances too obvious: *Barbara Grant*.

It was difficult for Isabel. Claire was not rude—not overtly so—but Isabel noticed an immediate cooling of her manner. And after a few remarks on the passage of time and the programme for the weekend, Claire drifted away, caught up in another circle of conversation.

Isabel smiled at Barbara. "I'm sorry I didn't recognize you straightaway. You probably noticed that. You know how it is…"

Barbara looked at her nervously. "It's a long time, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Isabel. The mention of time gave her the excuse to study Barbara; and if one couldn't appraise people at a reunion, then when could one do so? The years had had their impact in Barbara's case, she thought, but there were those high cheekbones that she remembered from school days. And the eyes were the same—those eyes of intense green. They had been her most noticeable feature, and they were still there. It was those eyes, she reflected, that had probably caused more dread in her victims than anything else.

But now it was different. The old confidence, the old sense of impunity, had gone. Why, Isabel asked herself, did they let her get

away with it? The staff must have known, but were presumably indifferent to it, thinking it was just the way girls of that age were.

"What did you do?" asked Isabel. "After leaving school? We seemed to have lost touch."

Barbara looked down at her glass of wine. "I went to university. King's College, London."

Isabel asked what she had studied, and Barbara told her. "French."

Isabel nodded. "And then?"

"I taught at a school in Norfolk. Holt. Greshams School."

Isabel brightened. "But that was where Auden went. He was at Greshams."

Barbara's gaze remained fixed on her wineglass. "Of course."

"And…" Isabel faltered. She knew that Benjamin Britten had been there and one of the Cambridge spies. Who was it? Kim Philby, she decided. "And Philby."

"Yes," said Barbara, flatly. "Auden and Philby."

"I gather there's a monument to Auden," said Isabel. "In the school grounds. What's it like?"

"Oh, it's not very big," said Barbara. "It records the fact that Auden was there. That's about it."

"There's that Britten monument in Aldeburgh, isn't there? That wonderful steel scallop on the beach."

"There is," said Barbara.

Isabel took a sip of her wine. This was the reality of the great bully: a rather dull woman with a markedly passive attitude. She must…She stopped herself. It was not Philby who had been at Greshams, but Donald Maclean. Like Philby, Maclean was a diplomat who passed secrets to the Soviet Union. He had been at Greshams and his name was still there, she had heard, on one of the honors boards. He had won a prize for something or other and his name was on a painted board in the school hall, along with Britten's and Auden's.

Barbara had started to say something. "I wasn't at Greshams for all that long," she said. "Four years. Then I took a job with a finance company in Glasgow. I met somebody there. He was Scottish, but he had just been offered a job in Australia."

Isabel nodded. "Oh yes, I think I heard you'd gone to Melbourne."

Barbara seemed taken aback by this, and looked defensive for a moment. But then she relaxed again. "We still live there, actually. But Iain, my husband, is an academic and has a full year's sabbatical. So that's why we're here. We're spending part of it Scotland and part in…" She trailed off.

Isabel waited, but Barbara did not finish, at least not immediately. It was as if she had forgotten where they were to spend the rest of the sabbatical. That was odd, Isabel thought.

"In France," said Barbara at last. "In Par…in Lyons."

"I see," said Isabel. She was still wondering why Barbara had confused Philby and Maclean, and she realized that it was probably for exactly the same reasons that she herself had done so. But then Barbara had taught there—she would have known far more about it. Was she for some reason making up the story of having taught at Greshams? Isabel could think of no possible reason for her to do so—it was confusion, pure and simple: confusion brought about by the emotional demands of the reunion. After all, if Barbara had enemies—and that seemed to be the case—then she could well be expected to feel anxious about attending a reunion of her victims; anybody in that position might well confuse one spy with another, particularly British spies of that period who were almost all from the same mold, which was half the problem thought Isabel: conformity—a uniform of accent, dress, assumptions—was the perfect cover for the nonconformist, the rebel, the spy.

The serving of the buffet supper changed the tone of the occasion. The high volume catch-ups over sparkling wine and canapés were replaced by more reflective conversation between smaller groups. People gravitated to old friends and talked together quietly, plates of food from the buffet balanced on knees. There was plenty of room to sit down, Isabel having borrowed extra chairs from the bedrooms and from neighbors. Jamie appeared for the meal, and was lionized by a number of the guests.

"So!" whispered one to Isabel,"you're the dark horse, Isabel Dalhousie! *Where* did you find him?"

Isabel laughed. "I met him through my niece," she said. She did not mention that Jamie had been Cat's boyfriend—discarded, of course, as all of Cat's boyfriends were; people would have enough to gossip about without adding that titbit.

"Lucky you," said the guest.

There were speeches, one from Eleanor that went on for twenty-three minutes—Isabel timed it—and a shorter one from Margaret, the other organizer. Eleanor was nostalgic, mentioning each of their teachers some of whom would join them for the lunch at the museum restaurant the following day. Every one of the teachers was described as "an inspiration," with a favored few being "both an inspiration and a pillar." Isabel stared at the ceiling: What had happened to Lot's wife? Was she not turned into a pillar of salt? Imagine her class reunion: *So sad that Lot's wife isn't with us today, but she's been turned*

into a pillar of salt, as you may have heard. So sad.

The evening came to an end shortly after eleven. Taxis had been called in advance, and they were waiting. Isabel said goodbye to the last of the guests and spoke briefly to the caterers, who were still clearing up in the kitchen.

"Well, everybody enjoyed themselves?" said the young New Zealander.

Isabel decided this was a question. "I think so."

"No disagreements?"

She looked at him, and laughed. "Is that what you expect at reunions?"

"Yes, it is?" He took off his apron and folded it up. "We did one the other day where the host hit somebody? Mind you, that was at a rugby club and you get that sort of thing?"

"Rugby is very physical," said Isabel.

"It is?"

Once the caterers had gone and Isabel had locked up downstairs, she went up to the bedroom. Jamie was already in bed, but was still awake.

"Well done," he said. "Round one over successfully. Nobody floored. And the umpire didn't stop the match."

She got undressed and slipped into bed beside him. "Thanks for being there," she said.

"I enjoyed it."

"They enjoyed having you." She snuggled up beside him. "Who did you talk to—I wasn't watching."

"Just about everybody," he said. "At one stage or another."

"Eleanor?"

"Yes. And her sidekick."

"Margaret."

"Yes. She went on a bit about the Lyceum Theatre. She's on the board—or was. I heard all about that—for ages."

"Thanks for putting up with it," said Isabel.

They lay still, and quiet, for a few moments. She heard his breathing. Then he said, "And Claire."

Isabel listened.

Jamie moved slightly. "She's…"

"Yes?"

"She's a bit…Well…"

Isabel caught her breath. "You picked that up?"

"I didn't say anything."

Isabel gasped. "What did she do? Made a move on you?"

"Not quite. No, when we were speaking she kept getting closer and closer. I had to take small steps backwards or…or we could have collided."

Isabel reached out and took his hand under the sheet. "Oh, darling, that's what she's like. She was the man-eater—or boy-eater, I suppose, in those days. I thought she'd changed."

"I don't think she has."

Isabel squeezed his hand. "Thanks for being so kind."

"I don't have to come to the lunch tomorrow, do I?"

Isabel said that he did not. He anyhow was in charge of Charlie.

"Oh, another thing," said Jamie. "I spoke to somebody called Barbara. She seemed to be rather isolated."

"Yes?"

"I felt a bit sorry for her."

"She wasn't very popular, I'm afraid. I've been surprised to find out what some people think of her. Feelings seem to be very strong."

Jamie was interested. "Really? Is that why she was by herself?"

"I think so. One or two people seem to feel that she was a real bully. I don't remember that myself—well, I remember a few incidents—but I don't recall anything major."

"Bullying can be pretty invisible," said Jamie. "Except to the victims."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Jamie shifted his position. He had been lying on his back; now he faced her. "She said something rather odd. She talked about the school as if it had been where it is now. The school hadn't yet moved when you were there, had it?"

"No, we were in the old buildings. The university took them over a few years after we left."

"That's what I thought," said Jamie. "But she spoke as if you had been at the new site."

Isabel said nothing. This was strange, and stranger still when considered along with Barbara's remark about Philby. She wondered about amnesia—people became confused about the past because they simply had a bad memory or suffered from some neurological complaint: that was conceivable, but unlikely, given Barbara's age. But there was another possibility, and it was as unsettling as it was unlikely: Barbara was not who she claimed to be. Isabel entertained that for a few moments before rejecting: it was patently ridiculous;

such things simply did not happen. Real life, after all, was relentlessly prosaic: people always were who they appeared to be, except…She paused for thought. There were plenty of exceptions to that, she decided, starting with the late Kim Philby himself.

Chapter Five

It preyed on her mind, and was there, as a question, when she opened her eyes the next morning. She had slept in and had been unaware of Jamie getting out of bed to attend to Charlie, who woke up at precisely the same time each morning and announced the fact by singing at the top of his voice.

Yes, thought Isabel: the whole thing is clear. There were two Grant girls at school—Barbara and a sister who was younger than Barbara by a couple of years. Isabel remembered little about that younger sister, but last night, as she drifted off to sleep, she recalled one thing, and it was sufficient to jolt her wide awake: Barbara's sister looked very like her—so like her, in fact, that the principal had once referred to the "Grant twins." Of course, of course…Barbara had sent her sister in her place. Why she should do this was not clear, unless she had been unable to face meeting her victims—which was understandable—and had sent her sister to give the apology that she could not give.

Isabel had drifted off to sleep with that possibility in her mind, but now, in the light of morning, it seemed absurdly fanciful. She wondered what Jamie would think, and she asked him when she went into the kitchen for breakfast. Charlie was halfway through his bowl of porridge, and Isabel, after kissing the boy on the top of his head, said to Jamie, "Do you think that Barbara Grant might be an imposter?"

Jamie laughed. "Imposter? What have you been reading, Isabel? Girls' school stories? The brave heroine unmasks…an *imposter*! Gasp. *You're a cunning imposter, she hissed, and I shall now unmask you!*"

Isabel blushed. "You may mock, Jamie, but —"

He did not let her finish. "Hear that, Charlie? Mummy is going to unmask an imposter!"

Charlie shouted out in delight. "Importer! Importer!"

Isabel tickled Charlie under the chin. "Imposter."

"Not," said Charlie.

"Don't spill your porridge," warned Jamie.

"I know it sounds ridiculous…"

"Highly," said Jamie.

"…but I'm going to speak to her."

Jamie smiled. "Unmask her?"

"If necessary," said Isabel.

She left the kitchen to go into her study, and it was at the study door that the key to the puzzle fell into place. It stopped her in her tracks, and she closed her eyes in sheer pleasure as the full realization dawned on her. It was all very neat. The reason for Barbara Grant's reluctance to attend might be much simpler than she had imagined: it was because she was in Australia, and it was for this rather compelling geographical reason that she could not do it—even if she could have managed the face-to-face encounter involved. Of course that was it; it was all very obvious once one came to think of it.

Eleanor, methodical to a fault, had provided each of the guests at the opening party with an updated list of the names of those attending, along with their address and mobile phone numbers. Barbara Grant's number was there, and Isabel dialed it once she left the kitchen. Could they meet before the lunch that day? Half an hour early—in the museum? Barbara sounded tense, but accepted the suggestion after only a moment's hesitation; she did not inquire why Isabel wanted to see her. There was something odd about her voice, Isabel thought—a passivity, even a note of defeat, or perhaps she was just tired.

Isabel rang off. She looked out of the window, past the shrubs to the yew hedge that screened the house from the road. She had enjoyed last night's party more than she had imagined she would, but now with several more reunion events before her she felt unsettled, and the thought of the looming meeting with Barbara Grant gave her a feeling of foreboding. The reunion, she decided, was an unnecessary and stressful complication to life. We did not need to reheat cold dishes from the past; we did not need to remind ourselves of people with whom we had lost contact and with whom we probably had very little in common. What was the point? She was not sure that she could see one; reunions, she felt, were not much more than a scratching at the vague itch of memory. And like scratching, they rarely helped—indeed, scratching often made matters worse, as any dermatologist would tell you.

She left for the Royal Scottish Museum earlier than she needed to, so when she arrived in Chambers Street she found she had time in hand. There was an exhibition of Jacobite material on show, some of it from the museum's own collection, some items from museums elsewhere. She looked at her watch and decided that twenty minutes

looking at that strange theme in Scottish history, that yearning for something lost that deserved to be lost but was still missed, would be twenty minutes better spent than visiting the museum shop. Such a visit would consist of inspecting tea towels, self-assembly models of dinosaurs, and tins of shortbread with Bonnie Prince Charlie's portrait on them. What a service, she thought, had the Stuart dynasty and their pampered, strutting Charlie done for the Scottish shortbread industry. Millions of tins of shortbread, she imagined, covered in tartan and with pictures of the prince must have gone out to the four corners of the world, to exiled Scots, who looked upon these tins, and the shortbread they contained, as somehow expressing the idea of a whole culture.

She sighed, and when, in the exhibition, she inspected a display of Jacobite glass, she sighed again; not because she was weary of the whole story, but because she realized that that story continued to induce in her exactly those sentiments that had caused her to sigh in the first place. She was no different from anybody else; the shortbread tins, the stories and songs, the lashings of tartan exerted their curious pull on her just as they did on those who swallowed the whole package enthusiastically, ahistorically and uncritically. The truth of the matter was that she loved Jacobite glass; that she delighted in the idea that people could have signaled to one another where their heart lay just by using a glass on which a white rose had been engraved. And she liked the music too: the wistful tunes of a lost cause; the laments for a Scotland that was never to be because geography dictated otherwise and Scotland was where it was.

"We had one at home."

Isabel spun around. Barbara Grant had come into the exhibition unnoticed, and now stood behind her.

"One quite like that," Barbara continued. "It had the white rose and a bunch of thistles. I thought it very beautiful and then my sister broke it one day and…"

She did not finish, but lowered her eyes, as if the memory of the broken Jacobite glass was still painful—which it probably was, thought Isabel: a family treasure shattered, reduced in a moment of carelessness to useless fragments after surviving for over two hundred years. And then Isabel remembered something: Barbara had been clumsy and had once broken a whole tray of beakers in the chemistry lab. Was the younger sister clumsy too, or was Barbara the one who, true to form, had broken the Jacobite glass, just as she had broken all those beakers?

Isabel pointed to another display case. "Did you see the miniatures?" she asked.

They moved over to the case together and Barbara leant forwards to peer at the row of tiny oval paintings it contained.

"The Stuarts sent them to supporters," said Isabel. "But they also sent them to various European royal families, hoping that one of them would marry their sons. Vain hope. Being a pretender apparently was no great recommendation."

Barbara looked up sharply, and Isabel suddenly realized what she had inadvertently said. *Being a pretender…*

Their eyes met, and for a moment Isabel felt that there was perfect understanding. *I know*, she thought. *And you know that I know.*

Isabel took a deep breath. "Barbara, I have to ask you something. I know that it's none of my business but I feel I have to say something." She had to say something, she had decided, because she had been drawn into this whole affair. She had hosted part of the reunion and it was in her house that the initial contact between Barbara and the others had been made. That brought Isabel in—beyond any doubt at all. There was bad feeling—great wells of it—and if she could help to deal with that, then she felt she should do just that.

Barbara held her gaze. She nodded, but said nothing.

"I know this sounds ridiculous, but I feel that you may not be who you say you are."

Isabel had not expected Barbara's reaction, which was one of complete astonishment. The other woman opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. Then she shook her head in bewilderment.

"I'm sorry," said Barbara. "I just don't understand what you mean."

Isabel felt her heart beating wildly within her. Absurdly, she thought: Is this what it's like to unmask an imposter?

Barbara's frown deepened. 'What do you mean, Isabel? What on earth do you mean?"

Isabel swallowed. Barbara's reaction was too spontaneous, too genuine to be anything but the reaction of an innocent person. Jamie was right; she was fantasizing; the whole idea had been absurd.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm all over the place. I'm sorry."

And then Barbara said, "I've been very unhappy about all this, you know."

Isabel looked up. "About the reunion?"

"Yes. And you probably know why, don't you?"

Isabel nodded. The tension she had felt was now almost entirely dissipated. What she now felt was relief, as if a moment of looming danger had passed safely.

"There seems to be bad feeling between you and some of the others," said Isabel. "They feel…" She struggled to find the words.

“They think you bullied them.”

Barbara’s lips pursed. For a few moments she was silent, but then she said, “They think I bullied them? Eleanor thinks that?”

“Yes,” said Isabel.

Barbara shook her head. “I did nothing to Eleanor. Or Claire Sutherland, for that matter. I hardly knew them.” She looked at Isabel intently. Her reaction had been one of mild outrage; now it became something different. “But I do have something to be ashamed of,” she said. “I admit it.”

Isabel waited.

“I was very unkind to one particular person,” Barbara went on. “I suppose you could say I bullied her. It was very cruel of me.” She hesitated before continuing. “I hate to think of it now. I am very, very ashamed of myself.”

Isabel felt a welling of sympathy within her. Of course you do, she said to herself. Of course you do. She wanted to say something that would comfort Barbara, and so she said, “All this was a long time ago. Bygones should be bygones. We all grow up.”

Barbara shook her head. “We don’t forget, though.”

“You were brave to come,” said Isabel. “I admire that.”

Barbara had been carrying a piece of paper, and she folded and unfolded this now. “I nearly didn’t,” she said. “But I wanted to come to apologize to that person in particular. I was hoping she would be here.”

Before Isabel had time to reflect on this, Barbara continued, “Jenny Maxwell. Do you remember her?”

Isabel froze. She had assumed that Barbara would have known of Jenny’s death, just as everybody else in the class did. But of course she might not have known, as she had gone off to Australia and had probably been out of touch. If you were living an entirely fresh life in Melbourne, then there was no reason why the news of a death in Scotland, which even in Edinburgh had been reported in a small death notice in *The Scotsman* should reach you so far away.

“Do you remember her?” pressed Barbara. “She used to wear glasses and her hair…” She stopped. “Isabel?”

Isabel had been unable to conceal her consternation. Now Barbara’s eyes narrowed. “She’s dead, isn’t she?”

Isabel winced. “Yes. Jenny’s dead.”

Barbara’s voice was barely audible. “Killed herself?”

“Somebody told you?”

Barbara continued to speak in a half-whisper. Her voice was unsteady. “No. I just felt it, the moment you said she was dead.” She

swallowed hard. “I didn’t ask anybody last night. I was going to, but I couldn’t bring myself to ask after her. Nobody said anything.”

Isabel made an effort to recover. “It wasn’t you,” she said. “It wasn’t anything to do with you. It was over a man—some man who let her down. The familiar story.”

Barbara put her hands to her face. She covered her eyes. She began to shake.

“It wasn’t,” said Isabel.

Barbara’s frame was shaken by sobs. Isabel took her in her arms; she pressed her to her. “It wasn’t your fault—it really wasn’t. You mustn’t think that.”

A man and a woman came into the exhibition room. The man consulted a guidebook—notes on the exhibits—but the woman saw them. She stood still for a moment before taking a step forwards. “Is everything all right?” She spoke with an American accent.

Isabel thanked her. “My friend’s a bit upset. Thank you anyway.”

“Oh dear,” said the woman as she moved away. Isabel smiled at her—a smile of appreciation that a stranger should take the trouble to offer comfort.

Isabel now led Barbara out of the exhibition room and into the hall outside. She found a bench in the atrium and sat down with Barbara; above them was the high glass dome through which the sky could be made out; a cloud—a wisp of white—sailed slowly over.

Isabel said: “I want you to listen very carefully, Barbara. I want you to listen to this. I know how you feel about what has happened. Yes, it appears that you were a bully at school and, yes, you made life a misery for at least one person—you’ve admitted that yourself. People say that you made Jenny Maxwell very unhappy. You did that because, I should imagine, you were suffering from the insecurity or self-hatred that most bullies have. That’s why they do what they do. They share their unhappiness with others. I assume that there was something that made you unhappy. Am I right?”

Barbara was not looking at her, but was staring fixedly at the floor.

“Am I?” repeated Isabel.

Barbara nodded, almost imperceptibly. “I…I…” She stopped.

“You don’t have to tell me,” said Isabel.

She could just make out the reply. “You know we had another sister? You know that there were three of us?”

Isabel shook her head. “I thought there were just two.”

“Well, there was an older sister—she was five years older than I was. You wouldn’t have known her because she was at the top end of the school when we started. She was called Andrea.”

Isabel waited for her to continue.

"She's dead now."

Isabel lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"I hated her."

Isabel looked into Barbara's eyes and saw the pain.

"She bullied both of us," said Barbara. "She was mean to us in every way you could imagine. My parents never saw it because she was so cunning, and it was concealed. We feared her, you know—we felt real fear. I wet the bed until I was twelve because of her—just because of her. My sister too."

"I'm so sorry."

"So when I went to school I felt that the only way I could protect myself from being hurt was to hurt others. I really thought that."

Isabel recognized this. It lay at the heart of the psychology of bullying. "You say she's dead?"

"Yes, she drowned in Spain. She was on holiday with some people there and she got into difficulties when she was swimming off a beach. I had to go out there to identify the body. I saw her laying in this ghastly morgue place and I just wept and wept and wept. I never thought it possible to cry for somebody who seemed to hate you so much. How was that possible? Or was I weeping for myself—for everything that had happened to me?"

"Can you forgive her? Can you do that?"

There was no response.

"Because if you can," said Isabel, "even if you can *start* to forgive, then it will become easier."

"And?"

"And then you will be able to forgive yourself—and ask others to forgive you." Isabel paused. "I'm sorry, this is sounding a bit like a lecture, but it isn't. It's common sense—it's how we get through everyday life. There's nothing special about it. We all have to face this sort of thing—every one of us."

Barbara still stared at the floor, but Isabel had a feeling that she had been listening. Now, she thought, is the time to take control.

"All right," she said. "I know how you can apologize to Jenny for your unkindness to her. You can't deliver the apology to her, but you can to Eleanor, who was her friend."

"She hates me," said Barbara. "I can tell."

"Maybe she does," said Isabel. "I won't lie to you about that. But you might be surprised at how quickly hate can evaporate—given a chance. Shall we try?"

Isabel saw that Barbara was crying. She moved over and put her arm about her.

"I'm sorry," said Barbara. "This is not just about the past. You see, my husband is leaving me. He's been having an affair for over a year now, and it's come to a head. I fought for him, but he's chosen her rather than me. I'm sorry, I'm just so upset about that."

"Oh, Barbara…"

"I'll be all right. What you said to me is true. I'll be all right. Just give me a few minutes. But one thing…"

"Yes?"

"Don't tell anybody else about this—about my husband. I don't want people's pity—I really don't."

—

Jamie asked that afternoon, when Isabel returned from the lunch at the museum, "So what happened at the restaurant? Anything?"

"Something rather important," said Isabel.

"Ah," said Jamie. "Tell all."

So Isabel told him.

"I spoke to Barbara Grant."

Jamie grinned. "So she is who she claims to be? Not an *imposter*?" He made the word sound ridiculous.

"No." She looked at him sternly. "Do you want me to carry on? Because if you do, you must recognize that this is serious."

He made a show of sitting up straight, and chastened.

"Barbara Grant had bullied a girl called Jenny Maxwell. Jenny died—it was suicide, but that happened some years later. It was more to do with a man behaving badly than with Barbara's persecution of her. Anyway, she came to the reunion to apologize to Jenny."

Jamie had stopped smiling. "Too late."

"I had to tell her that."

His face fell. "Oh, Isabel, what a…"

"Yes," she said. "It wasn't pleasant. But then…"

"I don't see how this story can end happily."

"Well it does," said Isabel. "I spoke to Eleanor and told her that when Barbara came to her she had to accept her apology."

"And what did she think of that?"

"She laughed at me. To begin with. Then I told her what Barbara had told me about herself. At first she didn't want me to reveal it, but then she said I could—just before we went to see Eleanor."

“What happened?”

“I promised Barbara I wouldn’t tell anybody else.”

“But you told Eleanor?”

“I persuaded Barbara to let me tell her.”

“And that changed Eleanor’s attitude?”

“It did.”

Jamie asked what had happened then. Isabel thought for a moment, remembering her surprise and her subsequent relief. “Something rather unusual,” she said.“I think that when she heard about Barbara’s situation—about what had happened to her—she felt a very simple human thing, the prompting of mercy. People don’t talk about mercy very much these days—it has a rather old-fashioned ring to it. But it exists and its power is quite extraordinary.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. Mercy comes before actual forgiveness. You feel sorry for somebody. You understand the other’s suffering and you forego anything that will make that worse. Mercy means saying: you shall not suffer the thing you fear—I will not make you do that.”

“I see.”

“And it’s the most wonderful thing to witness, Jamie—the actual showing of mercy. It makes me want to cry when I see it.”

She studied Jamie’s face. He would always be merciful, she thought; it was not in him to be vengeful.

“And then,” she continued, “something quite extraordinary happened. You want to know what it was? Forgiveness broke out. I think that’s the way I’d put it: it broke out. It was like stepping into the sun—you could actually feel it.”

For a few moments she and Jamie stared at one another.

“So a reunion,” he said at last, “can have a point.”

“This one has,” said Isabel.

He nodded. “I can see that. And I’m glad.”

“So am I.”

He raised an eyebrow. “All sorted?”

“Mostly,” she said. “Barbara must feel relieved, and Eleanor must feel, well, she must feel quite a bit better too. Forgiving somebody—which she has done—improves everything.”

He looked thoughtful. “What music goes with what you’ve told me? You know how I like to link things with music.”

She did know that. “You tell me,” she said.

“Mozart?” he said. “*Soave*?”

She smiled. He knew.

“I can play a version on the piano and you can think of the words,” he said. “One person can’t sing a trio.”

“No, one person can’t,” said Isabel.

They went into the music room. *He fills a room with his lovely presence*, thought Isabel—as does love, and forgiveness, and friendship.

“*Soave sia il vento*,” said Jamie, as he took his seat at the piano. “*May the breeze that carries you on your journey be a gentle one*.”

After he finished playing, he closed the lid of the piano, stood up and stretched his arms. And it was at this point that Isabel remembered something that Claire Sutherland had said at lunch. She had not been paying particular attention, but now it came back to her. Claire had made a remark about Barbara’s younger sister. “She became an actress,” she said. “Apparently she’s quite a good actress.”

Isabel had not thought much about it. Now she did. An actress. A good actress becomes the person she is portraying. A good actress can convince others that she feels what she says. A good actress could do everything that Barbara—or the sister—had done. *I have been completely misled*, thought Isabel. And then she added, *Maybe.*

But did it make any difference if the Barbara who was at the reunion was the real Barbara or her sister? What had been said in the museum could be entirely true—even if the words came not from the person about whom they were spoken but from an accomplished actress. If there were good reasons why you could not do what you needed to do in person, then did it matter if somebody did it for you—as long as you meant it where it mattered—in that chamber of your heart where the most intimate feelings lodged? If moral scales needed to be righted after all those years, then did it really matter who carried out the act of balancing them? What counted, surely, were the apology and the forgiveness—if forgiveness was forthcoming. And it had been here—that was beyond doubt.

That was what she was thinking when another possibility occurred to her. She stood quite still, as if immobilized by the thought. It was possible that the Barbara at the reunion was really the younger actress sister—that was perfectly possible—but she may not have been sent by the real Barbara at all, having come of her own accord in order to apologize on behalf her sister *who was never going to apologize because she did not want to.* The thought dismayed her, because it was another possibility altogether introduced at a late stage. But, again, did it really matter? She had thought only a moment ago that it did; now she was not so sure.

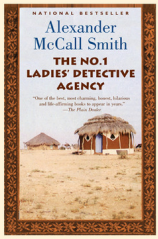
“Jamie,” she said, “what should one do if one has considered a possibility, rejected it, and then one finds out that your hypothesis

might have been correct all along. But, by the time you discover this, things have moved on."

He did not hesitate to reply. "You forget about it," he said.

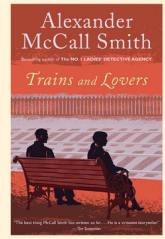
"You're probably right."

He moved towards her and took her in his arms. "Kind woman," he said. And then added, "Gorgeous."

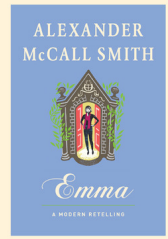


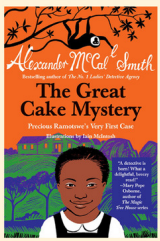
EXPLORE MORE GREAT BOOKS BY

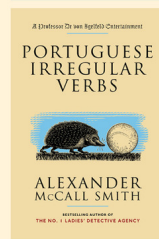
Alexander McCall Smith



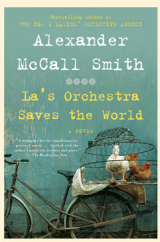
© CHRIS WATT

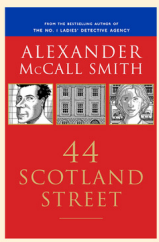


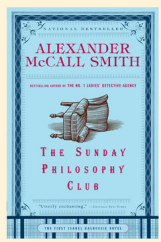


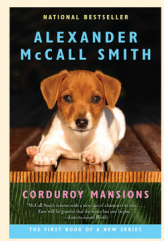


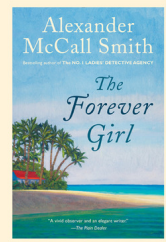
AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD

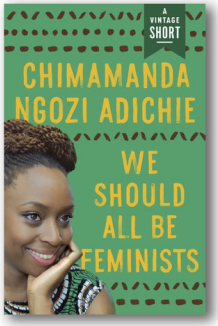




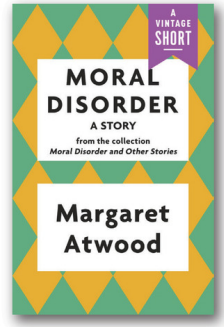


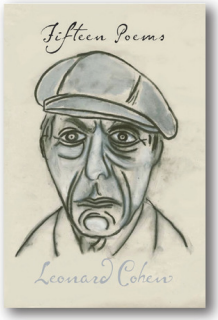






VINTAGE BOOKS AND ANCHOR BOOKS



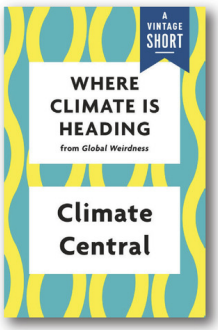


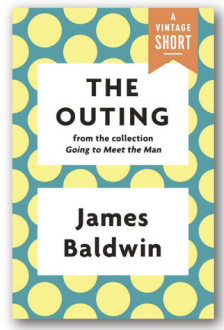
VINTAGE SHORTS

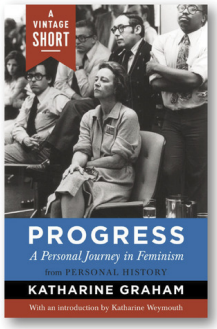
Timely reading from enduring classics.

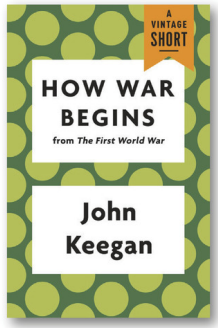
Exciting original works from contemporary voices.

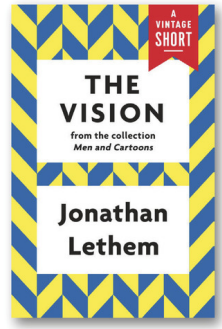
Exclusively available as eBooks.

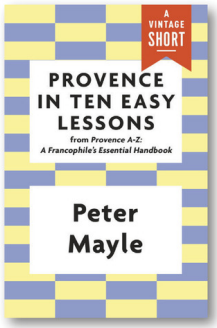


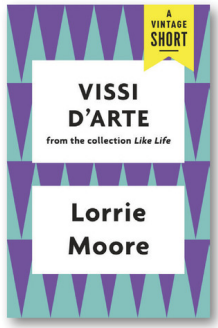



A VINTAGE SHORT
PROGRESS
A Personal Journey in Feminism
from PERSONAL HISTORY
KATHARINE GRAHAM
With an introduction by Katharine Weymouth

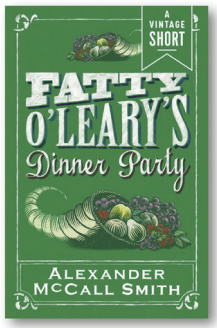

A VINTAGE SHORT
HOW WAR BEGINS
from The First World War
John Keegan

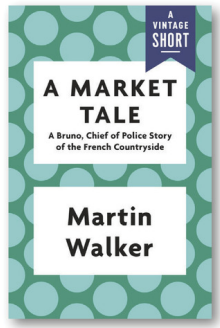

A VINTAGE SHORT
THE VISION
from the collection
Men and Cartoons
Jonathan Lethem


A VINTAGE SHORT
PROVENCE IN TEN EASY LESSONS
from Provence A-Z:
A Francophile's Essential Handbook
Peter Mayle


A VINTAGE SHORT
VISSI D'ARTE
from the collection Like Life
Lorrie Moore

A VINTAGE SHORT
AMERICAN HUNGER
Pulitzer Prize–Winning Series
Eli Saslow
The Washington Post


A VINTAGE SHORT
FATTY O'LEARY'S
Dinner Party
ALEXANDER McCALL SMITH


A VINTAGE SHORT
A MARKET TALE
A Bruno, Chief of Police Story
of the French Countryside
Martin Walker

HIGHLIGHTS FROM VINTAGE SHORTS

- **We Should All Be Feminists** by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
- **Moral Disorder: A Story** by Margaret Atwood
- **The Outing** by James Baldwin
- **Dallas: November 22, 1963** by Robert A. Caro
- **Where Climate is Heading** by Climate Central
- **Fifteen Poems** by Leonard Cohen
- **Progress** by Katharine Graham
- **How War Begins** by John Keegan
- **The Vision** by Jonathan Lethem
- **Provence in Ten Easy Lessons** by Peter Mayle
- **Vissi d'Arte** by Lorrie Moore
- **American Hunger** by Eli Saslow
- **Fatty O'Leary's Dinner Party** by Alexander McCall Smith
- **A Market Tale** by Martin Walker

Find out more on the Vintage Shorts Facebook page

Table of Contents

Cover
Alexander McCall Smith
Also by Alexander McCall Smith
Title Page
Copyright
    Chapter One
    Chapter Two
    Chapter Three
    Chapter Four
    Chapter Five